Conducting Practical Library Assessments that Promote Program Change and Improvements

Lauren H. Mandel

Charles R. McClure

Bradley Wade Bishop

John T. Snead

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Overview of the Paper

Three assessments of electronic library services:

1. Two-year development and evaluation of a the Hurricane Preparedness and Response for Florida Public Libraries Web Portal (hurricanes.ii.fsu.edu);

2. Three-month statewide public library broadband needs assessment (http://ii.fsu.edu/Research/Projects/All/Projects-from-2009-to-1999/2009-Project-Details); and

3. Nine-month multi-tier assessment of marketing and training plans for a statewide digital library, the Florida Electronic Library (FEL; www.flelibrary.org).

Hurricane Web Portal Evaluation

- Planned data collection for two scenarios:
    1. Hurricane/disaster event occurs, or
    2. Hurricane/disaster event does NOT occur.
        - Ultimately, evaluated web portal under Scenario 2
- Methods used:
    o Interviews/focus groups and surveys,
    o Usability, functionality, and accessibility testing, and
    o Web analytics.

Broadband Needs Assessment

- Multi-method data collection using 7 methods:
  - Literature review,
  - Interviews,
  - Case studies,
  - Site visits,
  - GIS analysis,
  - Survey data analysis, and
  - Costing models.

FEL Training and Marketing Assessment

- Three main tasks:
  - Measure usage of FEL-Gale resources,
  - Assess the effect of FEL-Gale training program on usability, and
  - Identify awareness of FEL-Gale resources.
- Methods used:
  - Analysis of usage statistics,
  - E-mail questionnaires with trainees, and
  - Telephone interviews to measure awareness.

Lessons for Conducting Program Evaluation

- Write proposals that are feasible given time and financial constraints.
  - Discuss what can and cannot be accomplished within the constraints of the request for proposals, such as budget limitations, imposed timelines, etc.
  - Write proposals that include *only* those tasks and activities that reasonably can be accomplished within those financial and time constraints
- Be organized at the start of a project to minimize problems later on.
  - Begin each project by compiling a detailed tasking document that lays out key tasks for the project, as well as step-by-step activities for each task, with a timeline to completion.
  - The tasking document is not set in stone but does serve to guide the overall project, help staff keep track of deliverables, and deadlines, and minimize issues regarding how tasks are meant to be accomplished.

Lessons for Conducting Program Evaluation

- Apply lessons learned in previous projects to new or existing projects.
  - Leverage existing data collection instruments, staff knowledge, and methods and procedures, so project teams do not have to re-invent the wheel.
  - Instead, staff have the opportunity to use their time and expertise in innovative ways.
- Maintain ongoing communication with funding agencies.
  - Communicate regularly with funding agencies supporting research projects so staff are not hit with multiple surprises along the way.
  - Regular communication allows project staff to solicit feedback from the funding agencies to include their good ideas in project development and implementation, as well as assuring that projects address funders' concerns.

Lessons for Conducting Program Evaluation

- Minimize project expenses by matching project activities with specific skills and knowledge of the project staff.
  - Projects that include concepts or methods that are foreign to project staff, considerable time, energy, and cost has to be expended educating the staff.
  - One way to mitigate costs is to match project activities with staff who expertise in certain areas.
- Identify and understand a project's situational factors as best as possible before beginning work.
  - Any project comes with multiple situational factors, such as the degree of access to various data points.
  - By understanding the limitations caused by situational factors, project staff can adapt the methodology early into the project with minimal effect on workload or outputs.

Lessons for Conducting Program Evaluation

- Understand and strategically manage, to the degree possible, the politics associated with a project.
  - Evaluation projects often come with political complications, such as a funding agency's need to justify services to the agency overseeing their efforts.
  - Project staff need to understand these political issues as best they can in order to complete the project in a manner that is both methodologically rigorous and meets the needs of the funding agency.

Parting Shots

- Practical evaluations can be conducted without complicated methods – *employing a multi-method approach permits comparison of findings from multiple data types, providing a more complete picture of a problem than could be obtained from a single method.*

- Practical evaluations can be conducted without major funding – *each of the three evaluations overviewed here cost less than $50,000.*

- Even without complicated methods and major funding, practical evaluations can have ***serious impacts***.

Additional Information About These Evaluations

- Hurricane/Disaster Preparedness and Response by Utilizing Florida Public Libraries: http://ii.fsu.edu/content/download/39198/251394

- Needs Assessment of Florida Public Library E-Government and Emergency/Disaster Management Broadband-Enabled Services: http://ii.fsu.edu/content/download/18354/118602

- Gale Training Evaluation, 2009-2010: http://ii.fsu.edu/content/download/36507/229600

Thank you!
Any Questions?

For more information, please see the Information Institute website at http://ii.fsu.edu

Or e-mail Dr. Charles R. McClure at cmcclure@lis.fsu.edu and Lauren H. Mandel at lmandel@fsu.edu